

### Cochineal bugs



If you have ever seen little white webs on the pads of prickly pear, you have seen these critters. They belong to a family of scale insects that are sap suckers.

These webs are actually masses of wax that house the mature female and her eggs. The wax protects the insect from predation by other bugs while she feeds on the juices of the cactus pad.

An even more interesting fact about these bugs is ... you've probably eaten them. Well not them specifically, but a similar South American species has been used for centuries as a dye for food and clothing.

The bugs are white until crushed and then expel a bright crimson color. The dye is approved by the Food and Drug administration and is found widely in food and beverages as well as being a popular colorant in many cosmetics, especially lipstick.

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